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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 008066

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TAGS: PGOV PTER PK

SUBJECT: PAKISTAN: FUNDAMENTALISM AND SUPPORT FOR OSAMA BIN LADEN  
AND THE TALIBAN IN THE PUNJABI COUNTRYSIDE (C-NA8-01076)

REFS: (A) STATE 190698, (B) ISLAMABAD 7155

(U) CLASSIFIED BY JOHN R. SCHMIDT, POLITICAL COUNSELOR. REASON 1.5(D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: RECENT CONVERSATIONS WITH A SAMPLING OF RURAL PUNJABI POLITICIANS PROVIDE EVIDENCE THAT RECRUITMENT TO MILITANT RELIGIOUS GROUPS IS INCREASING IN POORER AREAS OF THE PUNJABI COUNTRYSIDE (PRIMARILY SOUTHERN PUNJAB), BUT THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT A MASS FUNDAMENTALIST MOVEMENT IS IN THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING. THESE SAME SOURCES ALSO CONTEND THAT OSAMA BIN LADEN AND THE TALIBAN ARE HIGHLY POPULAR AMONG POORLY EDUCATED PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS (AND PROBABLY URBAN AREAS AS WELL). SUCH POPULARITY DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE RELIGIOUSLY MOTIVATED, BUT EXISTS AT THE LEVEL OF POPULAR CULTURE, REFLECTING THE NEED FOR SUCCESSFUL ROLE MODELS ON THE PART OF ORDINARY MUSLIMS FED UP WITH THE FAILURE OF SUCCESSIVE PAKISTANI GOVERNMENTS TO MEET BASIC HUMAN NEEDS. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) IN RESPONSE TO REFTEL A, POLCOUNS HAS RECENTLY SPOKEN WITH THREE PML MNAs REPRESENTING RURAL CONSTITUENCIES IN THE PUNJABI COUNTRYSIDE. THE THREE ARE MUMTAZ AHMED TARAR, A NAWAZ SHARIF LOYALIST WHO SERVES AS CHAIRMAN OF THE ASSEMBLY PUBLIC SERVICES COMMITTEE, COL (R) GHULAM SARWAR CHEEMA, A PARTY SWITCHING FORMER PPP MINISTER OF STATE WHO NOW SERVES AS CHAIRMAN OF THE ASSEMBLY DEFENSE COMMITTEE, AND SARDAR MANSOOR HAYAT KHAN TAMMAN, A LIBERAL-MINDED MNA NOW SERVING AS CHAIRMAN OF THE FINANCE COMMITTEE, TO WHOM POLCOUNS PAID A REPEAT VISIT. THE SUBJECT WAS SUPPORT FOR ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM AND THE TALIBAN IN THE PUNJABI COUNTRYSIDE.

¶3. (C) IN THE JUDGMENT OF POLCOUNS, TARAR WAS THE MOST COMPELLING WITNESS. IN A WIDE-RANGING DISCUSSION, HE CONTENDED THAT ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM (DEFINED AS SUPPORT FOR MILITANT RELIGIOUS GROUPS) IS A SIGNIFICANT PROBLEM ONLY IN RURAL DISTRICTS CHARACTERIZED BY LARGE LANDHOLDINGS (I.E., QUASI-FEUDAL AREAS), WHERE THERE WAS A STARK DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HAVES AND HAVE NOTS. THE ECONOMIC DISPARITY IN THESE REGIONS HELPED TO FUEL EXTREMIST RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES. HE CITED THE MULTAN, BAHAWALPUR, MIANWALI AND SARGHODA AREAS AS EXAMPLES. IN OTHER DISTRICTS, WHERE SMALL LANDHOLDERS PREVAIL AND THERE IS A FUNCTIONING MIDDLE CLASS, THERE ARE FEWER SOCIAL TENSIONS AND EXTREMIST RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES ARE HELD BY ONLY BY A FEW. HIS OWN DISTRICT, MANDI BAHAUDIN IN CENTRAL PUNJAB, FELL INTO THE LATTER CATEGORY. LESS

THAN ONE PERCENT OF HIS CONSTITUENTS BELONGED TO MILITANT GROUPS, USUALLY THE SUNNI SECTARIAN SIPAH-E-SAHABA PAKISTAN (SSP).

¶14. (C) TARAR SAID THE CASE WAS QUITE DIFFERENT WITH RESPECT TO SUPPORT FOR OSAMA BIN LADEN AND THE TALIBAN. HE BELIEVED THAT UPWARDS OF NINETY PERCENT OF THE CONSTITUENTS IN HIS DISTRICT AND, INDEED, THROUGHOUT URBAN AND RURAL PUNJAB, HAVE A HIGHLY FAVORABLE OPINION OF BOTH BIN LADEN AND THE TALIBAN. HE OPINED THAT BIN LADEN IS THE HERO OF THE MOMENT IN PAKISTAN AND WOULD WIN ANY ELECTION IN A LANDSLIDE. THIS WAS NOT DUE TO ANY WELLSPRING OF FUNDAMENTALIST RELIGIOUS SUPPORT. HIS OWN CONSTITUENTS, FOR EXAMPLE, WERE NOT PARTICULARLY RELIGIOUS. IT WAS DUE RATHER TO THE FACT THAT BIN LADEN AND THE TALIBAN APPEARED TO ORDINARY FOLK AS ISLAMIC HEROES WHO HAD NOT ONLY STOOD UP TO THE ANTI-ISLAMIC WEST BUT WERE SUCCESSFUL IN SO DOING. THIS WAS A HEADY CONTRAST TO THE PERCEIVED INEFFECTUALITY OF THEIR OWN LEADERS.

¶15. (C) TARAR ADDED THAT SUPPORT FOR THE 15TH AMENDMENT WAS SIMILARLY WIDESPREAD IN HIS DISTRICT. THIS WAS NOT DUE TO RELIGIOUS CONVICTION, BUT BECAUSE HIS CONSTITUENTS BELIEVED THAT IT WOULD EMPOWER THE GOVERNMENT TO BRING SWIFT JUSTICE AND LAW AND ORDER TO THE COUNTRY. DESPITE THE POPULARITY OF BIN LADEN AND THE TALIBAN IN RURAL AREAS, TARAR SAW LITTLE DANGER THAT PEOPLE FROM THE COUNTRYSIDE COULD BE PERSUADED TO TAKE MILITANT ACTION. THEY WERE INVOLVED IN THE DAY TO DAY STRUGGLE TO SURVIVE AND TOO REMOVED FROM THE CENTERS OF POWER. HIS OWN CONSTITUENTS WERE MUCH MORE FOCUSED ON OBTAINING GOVERNMENT LOANS WHICH COULD BE USED TO PAY AGENTS TO SMUGGLE THEM INTO WESTERN COUNTRIES. HE ESTIMATED THAT FIVE TO TEN PERCENT OF HIS CONSTITUENTS WERE WORKING OR HAD WORKED ABROAD. THE REAL DANGER CAME FROM THE URBAN AREAS, WHERE THERE WAS A MUCH LARGER CADRE OF FUNDAMENTALIST RABBLE ROUSERS WHO COULD POTENTIALLY MOBILIZE LARGE NUMBERS OF DISAFFECTIONED YOUNG PEOPLE.

¶16. (C) THE URBANE, HIGHLY POLISHED COL CHEEMA REPRESENTS A RURAL PUNJABI CONSTITUENCY NEAR GUJRANWALA AND OWNS PROPERTY IN THREE OTHERS (NEAR LAHORE, FAISALABAD AND JHANG). HE WAS MUCH MORE IMPRESSIONISTIC AND LESS SPECIFIC IN HIS OWN VIEWS ABOUT FUNDAMENTALISM IN RURAL PUNJAB. HIS OWN BELIEF WAS THAT THE FAILURE OF SUCCESSIVE GOVERNMENTS TO IMPROVE THE LOT OF THE PEOPLE HAD DESTROYED THE FAITH OF ORDINARY PAKISTANIS IN THE ABILITY OF THE TRADITIONAL POLITICAL CLASS (MILITARY AND CIVILIAN) TO PROVIDE GOOD GOVERNMENT AND SATISFY BASIC ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL NEEDS. THIS, IN TURN, HAD MADE THEM MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO ALTERNATIVE MESSAGES, SUCH AS THOSE CONVEYED TWO DECADES AGO BY THE IRANIAN REVOLUTION AND, MORE RECENTLY, BY THE TALIBAN.

¶17. (C) RICH WITH ANECDOTES, HE TOLD THE STORY OF AN ELDERLY WOMAN WHO HAD COME TO HIM FOR HELP DURING A RECENT VISIT TO HIS DISTRICT. ALTHOUGH THE ONLY ELECTRICAL ITEM IN HER ONE ROOM HOUSE WAS A LIGHT BULB HER BILL AMOUNTED TO 3000 RUPEES (60 DOLLARS, A FORMIDABLE SUM). ALTHOUGH SHE HAD A FAN, SHE COULD NOT AFFORD TO RUN IT. CHEEMA SAID THAT, WHILE HE HAD MANAGED TO GET HER BILL REDUCED TO 2500 RUPEES, THE WOMAN WAS TYPICAL OF THE CASES HE GETS DURING HIS WEEKLY AUDIENCES WITH CONSTITUENTS. HIS CONSTITUENTS WERE BENDING UNDER THE WEIGHT OF INCREASING POVERTY, WHICH MADE THEM MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO RADICAL RELIGIOUS MESSAGES.

¶18. (C) CHEEMA ALSO BEMOANED THE MANY FUNDAMENTALIST MADRASSAS (RELIGIOUS SCHOOLS) THAT HAD SPRUNG UP RECENTLY. HE TOLD THE STORY OF THE SON OF A CONSTITUENT WHO HAD BEEN PERSUADED TO DROP OUT OF STANFORD BY A VISITING PAKISTANI "TABLIGHI" (LAY ISLAMIC PROSELYTIZER) AND RETURN TO PAKISTAN TO ENROLL IN A MADRASSA NEAR LAHORE. HE HAD SUBSEQUENTLY BEEN LOST TO HIS FAMILY, WHO STRUGGLED TO GAIN PERMISSION TO SEE HIM AND RECEIVED FOR THEIR TROUBLES A PERFUNCTORY HELLO AND GOOD-BYE. HIS SENSE WAS THAT RECRUITMENT TO RADICAL MADRASSAS HAD BEEN SHARPLY ON THE INCREASE RECENTLY, SERVING AS A MAGNET FOR DISAFFECTIONED YOUTH. MUHAMMAD KHALID MASUD, PROFESSOR OF ISLAMIC LAW AT THE INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY, ECHOED THIS IN A CONVERSATION WITH POLCOUNS ON OCTOBER 24 CONTENDING THAT EXTREMIST VIEWS WERE COMING TO DOMINATE THE ENTIRE MADRASSA SYSTEM.

¶19. (C) CHEEMA SAID IT WAS HIS SENSE THAT SUCH TRENDS WERE FRAYING AT THE VERY FABRIC OF PAKISTANI SOCIETY, CAUSING THE COUNTRY TO BEGIN COMING APART AT THE SEAMS. SWITCHING METAPHORS, HE LIKENED PAKISTAN TO A DRIED OUT BALE OF HAY THAT NEEDED ONLY

THE SLIGHTEST OF SPARKS TO SET IT ALIGHT. NOTING THE SHARP INCREASE IN SECTARIAN VIOLENCE AND APPEARANCE OF MYRIAD SECTS ALL HOLDING THEIR OWN MONOPOLIES ON THE TRUTH, HE FEARED THAT ONCE THE SPARK WAS LIT ALL THESE GROUPS WOULD BE AT EACH OTHERS THROATS. LOOKING AT POLCOUNS RUEFULLY, HE COMMENTED THAT WHILE POLCOUNS WOULD SERVE IN PAKISTAN FOR ONLY A YEAR OR TWO, HE AND HIS COUNTRYMEN WERE CONDEMNED TO REMAIN BEHIND.

¶10. (C) IN ADDITION TO MEETING WITH TARAR AND CHEEMA, POLCOUNS ALSO PAID A RETURN VISIT TO SARDAR MANSOOR HAYAT KHAN TAMMAN, WHO HAD EARLIER REPORTED A SHARP INCREASE IN FUNDAMENTALISM AND PRO-TALIBAN SENTIMENT IN HIS RURAL PUNJABI DISTRICT (REFTEL B). TAMMAN DID NO BACKING AWAY FROM HIS EARLIER COMMENTS ABOUT FUNDAMENTALISM TAKING HOLD IN HIS DISTRICT. HE SAID THE POVERTY IN HIS DISTRICT HAD HELPED ATTRACT CONVERTS TO RADICAL RELIGIOUS GROUPS. AKRAM AWAN, A MIDDLE CLASS LANDLORD AND FOUNDER OF THE RADICAL AKHAN UL MUSLIMIN PARTY, ALSO HAILS FROM HIS DISTRICT. LIKE TARAR HE ALSO OBSERVED THAT, SINCE THE U.S. CRUISE MISSILE STRIKES IN AFGHANISTAN, THE FORMERLY UNKNOWN OSAMA BIN LADEN HAD BECOME A CELEBRITY AND SOMETHING OF A FOLK HERO AMONG THE ORDINARY PEOPLE IN HIS DISTRICT.

¶11. (C) SOME OF THE ABOVE OBSERVATIONS HAVE BEEN ALSO BEEN NOTED BY CONSULATE LAHORE. PO WAS STRUCK BY THE LARGE NUMBER OF FLAGS, BANNERS AND SLOGANS FOR THE JIHADIST LASHKAR-E-TAIBA (LT) HE NOTED IN SAHIWAL DISTRICT DURING A RECENT VISIT TO HARAPPA. THIS GROUP SPECIALIZES IN RECRUITING YOUNG PUNJABIS TO FIGHT IN KASHMIR. CONSULATE CONTACTS HAVE ALSO NOTED A CONTINUING STRENGTHENING IN SUPPORT FOR THE SSP IN RURAL PARTS OF KHANEWAL, TOBA TEK SINGH AND MULTAN DISTRICTS. THE SSP ALSO RECENTLY CAPTURED CONTROL OF THE JHANG MUNICIPALITY (ITS URBAN BIRTHPLACE) ALTHOUGH THE RURAL JHANG HINTERLAND REMAINS FIRMLY UNDER THE CONTROL OF THE LOCAL SHIA LANDLORD. ACCORDING TO CONSULATE LAHORE, MILITANT GROUPS SUCH AS THE SSP AND THE LT APPEAR TO BE EXPANDING THEIR SUPPORT AT THE EXPENSE OF THE MORE TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS PARTIES, SUCH AS JAMAAT-I-ISLAMI AND JAMAAT-ULEMA-I-ISLAM.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: IT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO BUILD A CLEAR PICTURE OF POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES IN THE PUNJABI COUNTRYSIDE BASED ON A SMALL HANDFUL OF CONVERSATIONS. WE DO NOT BELIEVE THAT THERE IS ANYTHING LIKE A MASS FUNDAMENTALIST MOVEMENT DEVELOPING IN THE RURAL AREAS. OUR SENSE, RATHER, IS THAT THE CONTINUING DETERIORATION IN ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IS FUELING A STEADY INCREASE IN THE RECRUITMENT OF DISAFFECTED YOUNG PEOPLE INTO RADICAL RELIGIOUS GROUPS LIKE THE SSP IN AREAS OF RURAL PUNJAB (PRIMARILY THE SOUTH) WHERE POVERTY BITES THE HARDEST. IN RAISING A RED FLAG, TAMMAN IS PROBABLY REACTING MORE TO AN IMPROVEMENT IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL ABILITY OF A LOCAL MILITANT GROUP WITH PRO-TALIBAN SYMPATHIES THAN TO A LARGESCALE INCREASE IN NUMBERS. FROM OUR PERSPECTIVE, THE DANGER IS NOT THAT RURAL PUNJAB IS TURNING FUNDAMENTALIST, BUT THAT RADICAL RELIGIOUS GROUPS ARE MAKING INROADS HERE JUST AS IN URBAN AREAS, FRAYING GRADUALLY BUT INEXORABLY AT THE STABILITY OF THE STATE.

¶13. COMMENT CONT. AS FOR THE ALLEGED WIDESPREAD SUPPORT FOR OSAMA BIN LADEN AND THE TALIBAN AMONG ORDINARY PEOPLE, OUR INSTINCTS TELL US THIS MAY WELL BE CORRECT, BUT FOR THE REASONS CITED BY TARAR. SUCH ATTITUDES DO NOT REFLECT RADICAL RELIGIOUS SENTIMENT OR EVEN ACTIVIST POLITICAL SUPPORT BUT OPERATE AT THE LEVEL OF POPULAR CULTURE, WITH BIN LADEN AND THE TALIBAN VIEWED AS A SUCCESSFUL ISLAMIC ROLE MODELS. (PUNJABIS, AFTER ALL, ARE MUCH MORE CONCERNED ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS IN KASHMIR THAN IN AFGHANISTAN.)

¶14. COMMENT CONT. NONETHELESS, THE FACT THAT BIN LADEN AND THE TALIBAN CAN FUNCTION AS CULTURAL ICONS IS CLEARLY AN INDICTMENT OF THE PAKISTANI POLITICAL CLASS, WHICH HAS MISERABLY FAILED TO PROVIDE EITHER GOOD GOVERNMENT OR POSITIVE ROLE MODELS. IT IS ALSO AN INDICATION OF THE SUSCEPTIBILITY OF ORDINARY PAKISTANIS TO ANTI-WESTERN PROPAGANDA, ITSELF NOURISHED BY THE FAILURE OF SUCCESSIVE PAKISTANI GOVERNMENTS TO DELIVER THE GOODS, BUT REFLECTING ALSO THE CUMULATIVE IMPACT OF YEARS OF WHAT HAS BEEN PERCEIVED HERE AS ANTI-ISLAMIC BEHAVIOR BY THE UNITED STATES. END COMMENT.